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TEACH ARCHIVE PRESERVE EXHIBIT

A COMPANION GUIDE TO THE MAGNETIC COMMUNAL MAGIC OF PERSONAL PROBLEMS

A ZINE BY
T.A.P.E. LOS ANGELES

"So what happens when a group of unbankable individuals tell their stories? Actors who have final say over their speaking parts? A director, who was found "too difficult" for Hollywood? A composer, who would not submit to the formulaic mediocre soundtracks required by the industry? A Black male lead, who was not black enough? A Black actress lead who was not light enough? An actor who had been retired because he belonged to another era? He was a star during the "Race Films" era. A cinematographer who chose art over expediency? An unmarketable male, a roguish charming home wrecker who didn't look like Clark Gable? Three producers – Walter Cotton, Steve Cannon and Ishmael Reed – who, having no experience in producing movies, organized a production with the amount of money that Hollywood spends on catering? Maybe less. Some consider the result to be a classic."

– Ishmael Reed, on *Personal Problems*

SONY VIDEO

SONY.

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TEXT + RESEARCH FOR THIS ZINE ADAPTED FROM:

"Bill Gunn's 'Personal Problems' and a History of the Video Revolution » PopMatters," January 18, 2019. https://www.popmatters.com/bill-gunns-personal-problems-and-the-video-revolution-2625996246.html.

Forster, Nicholas. "Improvisational Jamming: The Process and Production of Personal Problems - Journal." Metrograph, November 7, 2022. https://metrograph.com/improvisational-jamming/.

Lacava, Stephanie. "Sam Waymon on His Creative Partnership with Bill Gunn." Screen Slate, June 1, 2021. https://www.screenslate.com/articles/sam-waymon-his-creative-partnership-bill-gunn.

Lucca, Violet. "Interview: Ishmael Reed." Film Comment, March 30, 2018. https://www.filmcomment.com/blog/interview-ishmael-reed/.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

ISHMAEL REED'S ARCHIVES

@ University of Delaware Special Collection - https://findingaids.lib.udel.edu/repositories/2/resources/2314

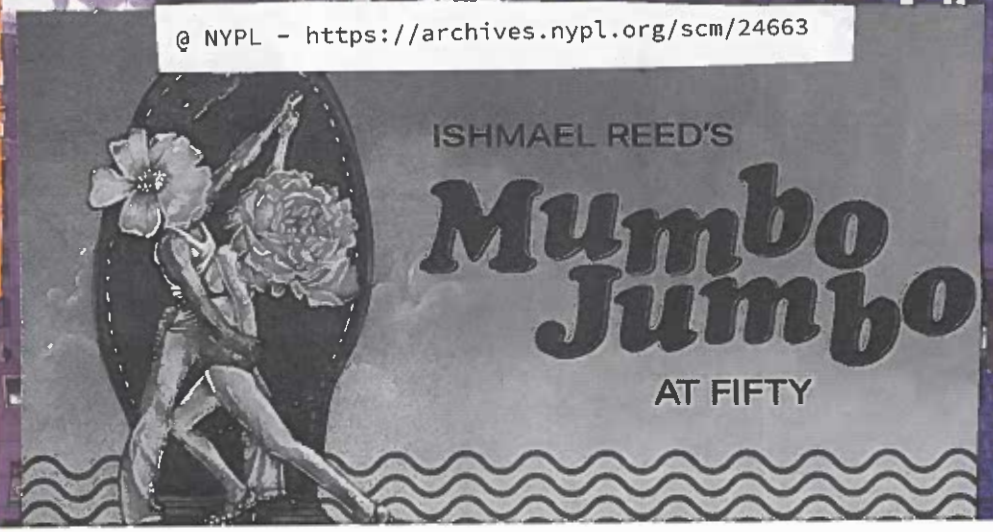
Mumbo Jumbo at 50 Digital Exhibit - https://exhibitions.lib.udel.edu/ishmael-reed-mumbo-jumbo/story/

STEVE CANNON + A GATHERING OF TRIBES ARCHIVES + RECORDS

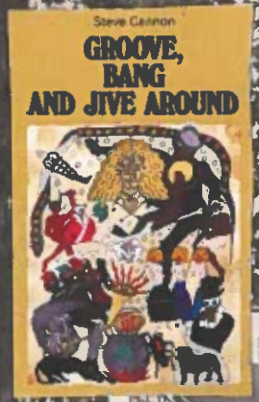
@ NYU Libraries - https://findingaids.library.nyu.edu/fales/mss_198/

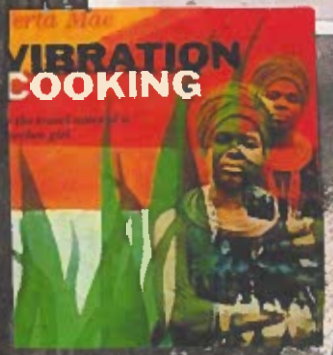
BILL GUNN'S PAPERS

@ NYPL - https://archives.nypl.org/scm/24663



THE CAST + CREW





A SHORT HISTORY ON THE PRODUCTION OF PERSONAL PROBLEMS

After a few years of living in New York City as an artist, writer Ishmael Reed, inspired by the "personal problems" of the community of black artists he was a part of, began developing a script for what would become the first self-described Black soap opera written, acted, and produced by Black artists. He recruited fellow writer, Steve Cannon, and actor Walter Cotton to help develop and produce this idea into something tangible.

Before further pitching the script as a TV show, *Personal Problems* was developed as an episodic radio drama about a Black middle-class family living in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. The production of the first episodes were funded by several small art grants and was recorded in Cannon's apartment – with only three actors, Walter Cotton, Jim Wright, and Vertamae Grosvenor, who all would later be cast in the film.

After the first take, Cannon and Reed would have the actors reperform the "script" and encourage them to improvise them to both to further explore and deepen the relationship dynamics between the characters and excavate a piece of quotidian truth in the mundane dramas of everyday life. By 1979, Cannon would share the first episode of *Personal Problems* on his radio show WBAI in NYC, and Reed would share it on his own program on KQED in California. Over the next 2 years, four episodes were produced and broadcasted, and with enough funding secured, Reed and Cannon hired a cast and crew of friends to work on a video pilot of Personal Problems. With the help of poet and friend, Joe Johnson, they approached Bill Gunn to direct, who had been stymied by Hollywood after his first official directorial credit, *Ganja & Hess* (1973), was largely ignored by critics.

In part for financial reasons, the crew decided to shoot on ¾" U-Matic videotape. Analog video was a much less expensive format than the usual alternative film, but came with a host of technical challenges. These challenges contributed to the film's unique aesthetic quality such as fluctuating exposures and the visual "ghosting" or smearing that appears when bright objects move across the screen (due to using tube-based cameras that use automatic irises). The pilot made its debut by 1980 as a "work in progress" at the San Jose Fine Film Series, and served as a demo reel for further financing and fellowships. PBS rejected the show but Reed won an NEA grant and was able to expand his crew to 30 people.

Press Release for the 1981 television broadcast of Personal Problems on KQED in San Francisco

KQED NEWS

PUBLICITY DEPARTMENT KQED INC. 500 EIGHTH ST SAN FRANCISCO CA 94103 415 864-2000

11/3/81
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:
Contact: Rachel Ross
(415) 553-2288

"PERSONAL PROBLEMS," A BLACK SOAP OPERA, PRODUCED BY ISHMAEL REED, AIRS ON KQED.
(AIRDATE: Sat. Nov. 21, 11:35 p.m.)

"Personal Problems," a videotape production by Ishmael Reed, is a cooperative effort by Black writers and performers to present the Black-American experience through genuine images challenging those customarily seen on commercial sitcoms. Airing Saturday, Nov. 7, at 11:30 p.m., on Channel 9, "Personal Problems" reflects the diversity of working people's real life struggles. Ishmael Reed, noted poet, author, and journalist from Berkeley, chose the standard T.V. soap opera format as a vehicle because, he says, "it is an American invention and not much has been done to develop it by serious artists."

True to the soap opera format, "Personal Problems" presents characters defined by their problems alone,but their frankness and unsentimental response to their own human drama distinguishes this 90-minute program as highly original. The performers, director and producer improvised upon the video treatments to create scripts. This unique style of dialogue is handled with depth and humor by a professional cast including Walter Cotton, Verta Mae Grovesnor, and Jim Wright.

"Personal Problems" follows Johnnie Mae Brown (played by Verta Mae Grovesnor) through her depressing hospital workday (a sequence actually filmed in Harlem Hospital), to a country scene with her lover and back home to her unfaithful husband and freeloading relatives. Her delicately balanced life collapses dramatically,but her strength never flags.

The concept of a Black soap opera was originated by Reed in 1978. He launched the project in radio episodes which were aired on WBAI in New York and KPFA in Berkeley. Beginning with two writers and a handful of actors, "Personal Problems" has grown to a dedicated production staff of thirty. "The whole crew contributed their labor to this project," said Reed. "They are our most valuable assets."

A quality, low-budget independent production, "Personal Problems" was shot in and around New York city and escapes the interior confines associated with conventional soaps. The drama was directed by Emmy-Award-winning playwright, Bill Gunn; produced by Ishmael Reed and Walter Cotton; photographed by Robert Polidori; with an original music score by Carman Moore.

(over)

LA Premiere at EZTV Video Gallery

EZTV VIDEO GALLERY - JULY 1984

THURSDAY - SUNDAY, JULY 5 - 8 L.A. PREMIERE 8:00PM

PERSONAL PROBLEMS (1983, 120 min.)Oakland-based author/poet Ishmael Reed ("Mumbo Jumbo") has transformed the soap opera form into a naturalistic "video verite" depiction of the plight of a middle class black family in New York City. The characters deal with exhausting jobs that provide too little money, freeloading relatives who don't buy more toilet paper when it runs out, extramarital lovers who offer escape and concomitant confusion, medical authorities who don't give satisfactorary answers, and life's general triteness that gnaws away at happiness. The original treatment was written by Ishmael Reed and Al Young, then expanded improvisationally by the cast, which includes Verta Mae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton, and Jim Wright. Emmy award winner Bill Gunn (Ganga and Hess) directed. Walter Cotton produced.

THE CREATORS

Ishmael Reed (writer/producer) > Born in 1938 in Tennessee and still alive in beautiful Oakland, California. A poet, novelist, essayist, songwriter/composer, and publisher. Reed's pen has no generic or stylistic limit - as he has published over 30 books of poetry, prose, essays, and plays - and even written songs for jazz artists and neo-soul singers like Taj Mahal and Macy Gray. His best-known work is his novel *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972), a sprawling satirical work bordering on cinema and mythology set in 1920s NY. He founded many literary presses and including his collaborative press, has published writers like Ntozake Shange, Amiri Baraka, Toni Cade Bambara.

Bill Gunn (director/co-writer) > Born in 1934 and died in 1989. A Philly native, playwright, novelist, actor, and director. He only directed 3 films in his lifetime. The most famous title being his horror cult classic, *Ganja + Hess* (1973), which he also starred in as Dr. Matara. His first directorial debut would have been *Stop!* (1970), a feverish psychedelic erotic drama, funded by WB, but was ultimately shelved by the studio. A VHS copy exists circulating in the quiet corners of the internet. He's also written 29 plays in his lifetime, acted on Broadway with James Dean, and appeared in a dozen roles in film and television, including 2 episodes of *The Cosby Show* and in Kathleen Collin's *Losing Ground* (1982).Gunn passed in 1989 from encephalitis, the day before his play *The Forbidden City* opened in NYC.

Steve Cannon (presenter/producer) > Born in 1935 and died in 2019, Cannon was a NOLA native and a writer. He moved to NY in 1962, where he met Ishmael Reed through the Society of Umbra, a collective of Black writers, vested in creating an intentional collaborative creative community for black artists. In 1969, he authored his first novel, *Groove, Bang, and Jive Around*, a surrealist erotic odyssey that follows a teenage runaway through a New Orleans odyssey of jazz, psychedelia, voodoo, and smut gone awry. In 1991, he founded A Gathering of Tribe in Manhattan, a salon and gallery, arts publication, and non-profit multi-cultural interdisciplinary arts org - exhibiting work from artists like David Hammons, Sun Ra Aresktra, and David Henderson.

THE CAST

Vertamae "Kuta" Smart-Grosvenor - Plays Johnnie Mae Brown. She was a Gullah girl from the low country of South Carolina. She traveled to Paris to pursue theater and hung out in artist circles in NYC in the early 70s. She was a dancer, costume designer, member, and cook for Sun Ra's Solar-Myth Arkestra. In 1970, she would write her first book, *Vibration Cooking: or the Travel Notes of a Geechee*, a memoir and travelogue told through the recipes she grew up with and encountered throughout her life. Smart-Grosvenor worked in public broadcast throughout the 1980s and 90s, and appeared as Grace in *Beloved* (1998), and the Hairbraider in *Doughters of the Dust* (1992). She would eventually pass at 79.

Walter Cotton (producer) - Plays Charles Brown. A Buffalo-native and a writer, actor, and producer. Cotton was enmeshed in the NYC theater scene in the 1960s and 1970s and founded the Clowns Repertory Theater Company and served as an original member of the Cornbread Players, an all-black theater troupe. Cotton played supporting roles in Ossie Davis' *Cotton Comes to Harlem* (1970) and *Gordon's War* (1970). Cotton died of cancer in 2013.

Sam Waymon - Plays Raymon. He wrote, composed and produced music, played piano, and managed his sister's music career, Nina Simone. He won awards for composing music for Broadway musicals and scored the films: *Just Crazy About Horses* (1978), *Philadelphia* (1996), and Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess* (1973), which Waymon co-starred in. Waymon and Gunn continued to work together in the theater productions Black Picture Show (1974) and The Forbidden City (1989).

Jim Wright -Plays Father Brown. Wright was an actor, dancer, and performer. He starred in numerous stage productions including the Broadway production of Cabin in the Sky and the Federal Theatre Project production of Macbeth. Wright also appeared in William Alexander's Souls of Sin (1949), an independent "race film." He passed away during the shooting of the second half of *Personal Problems* and the crew dedicated the episode to him.

West Coast Premiere at the PFA

Ishmael Reed & Steve Cannon

invite you to

A SCREENING

of their full-length Tele-movie

"PERSONAL PROBLEMS"

starring

Verta Mae Grosvenor, Walter Cotton & Jim Wright

directed by Bill Gunn | produced by Walter Cotton | with music by Carmen Moore

Director Bill Gunn, Producer Walter Cotton, Ishmael Reed, & Actor Calvin Lockhart at S.F. Premiere of "Personal Problems"

Sunday DECEMBER 14th

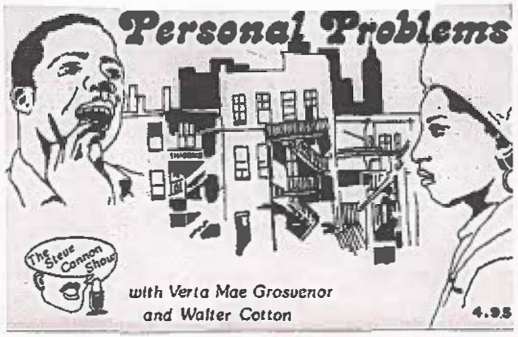
showings at 2:00 & 3:45 p.m.

PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

2650 Durant Ave., Berkeley

Reception follows at 6:00 p.m.
at the SCARAB, 2136 San Pablo Ave.,
(1½ blocks south of University Ave.) in Berkeley

Personal Problems : the radio drama on audiocassette presented on the Steve Cannon Show



Bill Stephens, who acted as the cinematographer for the pilot, stepped down from the role and was replaced by Robert Polidori, an artist who worked as an assistant at Anthology Film Archives. Polidori used 2 Sony cameras to shoot the film, to take advantage of the capacity to record up to 60 minutes of footage per tape. Working with Gunn, Polidori kept the camera running even after the end of a scene, creating an atmosphere of "improvisational jamming." He explained wanting to "set up the dramatic tensions" where "the outcomes" were not "predetermined." In line with the improvisational nature of the original radio drama, Gunn let the actors build their own backstories and develop dialogue on the set with both a relaxed and steady hand in guiding them.

Personal Problems had its world premiere at the Centre Pompidou in November 1980. It also premiered at the New School's Parson's Auditorium on and SUNY Buffalo on the east coast and the Pacific Film Archive on the west coast before the year was over. It would make its LA premiere in July 1984, hosted by EZTV Video Gallery, a LA-based microcinema dedicated to exhibiting shot-on-video experimental work. Local affiliates KQED and WNYC expressed interest in broadcasting the film, but the gradual degrading quality of U-Matic tape made stations hesitate to follow through on sharing the film. With some restoration work, KQED broadcasted Volume 1 of the film in November 1981 on a late Saturday night, and on WNYC broadcasted on a 9PM on a Sunday - both time slots where very few people would tune in. In 1982, Reed traveled throughout the country screening the film in museums, universities, and galleries, but failed to find financing support among major networks.

In 2010, interest in the film began to resurface as a film programmer, Jacob Perlin, began curating the film series "The Groundbreaking Bill Gunn," at BAMcinematek in New York City. As part of his research, he attempted to digitize Reed's massive collection of video material. This included the 58 U-matic tapes that made up the production of *Personal Problems* – of which they screen at the Whitney. Kino Lorber's director, Bret Wood attended this screening and began working with Perlin and Reed to restore Personal Problems to a condition that respects the technical idiosyncrasies of the ¾" format but minimizes the flaws that would get in the way of audiences enjoying the film. Because the edited master was two generations removed from the original source tapes and suffered from tape dropout and visual artifacts, Kino Lorber created their restoration from the original camera source tapes. Shot-by-shot color grading gave more consistency to the fluctuations of color fading and exposure. The soundtrack was remixed and centered for a natural balance between dialogue and music. Kino Lorber finally released the restoration on DVD and Blu Ray in 2018, where it premiered at the New York Film Festival at the Museum of Modern Art.